

# Apps to Help You Stay Connected to Your Family and Friends

by Doug Hillary, LTCL Tech Coach

While we are still dealing with the effects of the pandemic, it is more important than ever to stay connected. If you're like me, you may find it a bit confusing trying to navigate the various apps you can use to communicate with your friends, family, or with larger teams and organizations.

I put the following list together to try to help you learn more about the most popular apps which are readily available. All these apps offer free versions and all of them offer more features and capabilities if you choose to pay for upgrades or subscriptions. However, for purposes of this exercise, I focused on describing the primary features of the free versions of these apps. There are many similarities, but there are also unique features to each app so I would encourage you to try them out since these apps are free (although most, if not all require you and your contacts to set up an account). See what works best for you.

I put together a chart to try to illustrate the key features across all the free versions of the apps I reviewed. This may be helpful to quickly determine which apps may be of most interest to you.

	App	SmartPhone Compatibility	Computer Compatibility	Max # Users	Time Limit	Phone Calls	Video Calls	Chat & Text	Captions <sup>1</sup>	Recording <sup>2</sup>	Screen Share <sup>3</sup>	File Share <sup>4</sup>	Video or Voice Message <sup>5</sup>	Games
Consumer	Whatsapp	Android, iOS	Windows, Mac	8	None	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	Facebook Messenger	Android, iOS	Windows, Mac	8/50 <sup>6</sup>	None	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	(Web)	Yes	No
	FaceTime	iOS <sup>7</sup>	Mac <sup>7</sup>	32	None	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
	Google Duo	Android, iOS	Windows, Mac	32	None	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	Google Chat	Android, iOS	Windows, Mac	N/A	N/A	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
	Viber	Android, iOS	Windows, Mac	30	None	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
	WeChat	Android, iOS	Windows, Mac	500	None	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Business	Houseparty	Android, iOS	Windows, Mac	8	None	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
	Zoom	Android, iOS	Windows, Mac	100	40	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	Skype	Android, iOS	Windows, Mac	100	4/10/100 <sup>8</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	Slack	Android, iOS	Windows, Mac	1	None	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	Webex	Android, iOS	Windows, Mac	100	50	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
	Google Meet	Android, iOS	Windows, Mac	100	60	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

<sup>1</sup>Captioning: uses speech-to-text technology for participants who may have difficulty hearing

<sup>2</sup>Recording: ability to record a video call session or conference

<sup>3</sup>Screen sharing: ability to share your video screen with other participants

<sup>4</sup>File sharing: able to share various file formats like pictures, videos, documents, pdfs, etc.

<sup>5</sup>Voice/video messaging: the application allows you to record and send a video or voice message.

<sup>6</sup> 8 Messenger Group, 50 Messenger Room

<sup>7</sup> Available on Android and Windows in Fall of 2021

<sup>8</sup> 4 Hrs/Call, 10 Hrs/Day, 100 Hrs/Mo.

**Apps for Family and Friends** (Whatsapp, Facebook Messenger, Facetime, Google Duo, Google Chat, Viber, WeChat, and Houseparty). These apps tend to have fewer features than business-oriented apps like Zoom, Skype, etc. However, they also tend to be more intuitive and easier to use for most individuals.

**Whatsapp:** Whatsapp is owned by Facebook and is mainly known for instant messaging and the ability to make free phone calls over Wi-Fi networks. Whatsapp is also very popular internationally with approximately two billion monthly active users. Whatsapp recently increased the number of participants on video calls to 8 individuals (as of June 2021). It is also recognized for its end-to-end encryption capabilities, so it can provide a more secure option for communications.

*Opinion: Good option particularly if you want to communicate with friends and family outside the US and/or your contacts use a mix of Apple and Android devices.*

**Facebook Messenger:** Facebook's answer to Apple's Facetime, and Google's Chat/Duo/Meet is Messenger. Notable for Messenger is that it also works with Facebook's smart home display called Portal.

*Opinion: Messenger is a good option if you want to connect with larger groups than other apps, and if you have a mix of platforms or devices to work with.*

**Facetime:** Facetime has a very easy and intuitive interface, and it is quite easy to learn how to make and receive video calls. Previously available only to iOS and MacOS devices, Apple announced that Facetime is now available on all platforms.

*Opinion: Perhaps the easiest of all to use.*

**Google:** Google's offerings can be confusing with the various choices you have as well as the changes they have made in their apps and offerings over the last couple of years (Hangouts, Meet, Chat, Allo, Duo). To help sort things out a bit, here is what you need to know:

**Google Hangouts** is going away and is being replaced by **Google Chat** (messaging, collaboration) and **Google Meet** (business-oriented collaboration solution to compete with Slack). If you are using Google Workspace, Google will start migrating Hangouts users to Chat on Aug 16<sup>th</sup>. While Chat supports many of the functions of Hangouts, direct calling will not be available until later this year. **Google Allo** (texting app) was retired in May 2019. **Google Duo** (video calling) is still available for consumers.

**Google Duo:** Google Duo is a relatively simple video calling option for you to consider, especially if you use a lot of Google services like Gmail or Google Workspace. Since the app syncs with your Google contacts, it is very easy to do video calls. Google Duo also works with Google's smart home display called Nest Hub Max. Duo also has a feature called "Knock Knock" which turns on your camera before you pick up the call so you can see who's calling. One risk with Duo is that it may not be around long.

*Opinion: Google Duo is a good option for one-to-one calling or small groups. However, if you need more robust features, take a look at Google Meet.*

**Google Chat:** Available in Gmail, Google Workspace, and as a standalone app in iOS and Android. Unless you've opted out, Google Chat will replace "classic Hangouts" as the default chat application for Google. It is designed for more business-oriented use, especially for individuals or teams which use Google Workspace.

*Opinion: Works very well if you and your contacts primarily use Gmail and/or Google Workspace.*

**Viber:** Viber provides text, voice, and video calls free of charge. Like Whatsapp, Viber users can send messages and make international calls to other Viber users for free (although if you call a landline or mobile number fees may apply). Viber also touts its' use of end-to-end encryption to enhance privacy.

*Opinion: Viber provides an interesting alternative to Whatsapp, especially if you have a lot of international contacts to keep in touch with.*

**WeChat:** WeChat is a Chinese app that offers voice, text, video and group chats, and limited international calling capabilities. It appears that file sharing is better on web-based, or PC apps as opposed to Smartphone apps. WeChat has a "People Nearby" feature that allows you to meet new people using the WeChat application. WeChat also includes features like "time capsule" (similar to Instagram's stories), games, and "WeChat Pay" for purchases in certain locations.

*Opinion: WeChat is a full featured application that can be useful, especially if you have family, friends, or work in China. On the downside data privacy and security may be a concern for some since WeChat is a Chinese-owned application.*

**Houseparty:** Houseparty is a relatively easy to use app for chat and video calls. A big plus for Houseparty is that it has games built in which you can play while you are on a video call. Games include HeadsUp!, Trivia, Quickdraw, and Pictionary. The app will also alert you when someone is available so you can allow them to easily join in on a chat session.

*Opinion: Less capable than other options, but it could be a good solution for smaller groups, especially if you enjoy the built-in games.*

**Apps for Larger Groups or Organizations:** (Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, Slack, Webex, Google Meet). These apps tend to have more robust features and capabilities to enable you to collaborate with others via video, text, and sharing of data and documents. These apps also offer upgraded features you can pay for if you wish to have more capabilities than the free version offers. While generally more capable than consumer-oriented apps described above, they also tend to be less intuitive.

**Zoom:** Zoom has become a very popular business-oriented app for conducting video calls and conferences. It works on all platforms and supports plugins for Outlook and extensions for Chrome and Firefox browsers to make it easier to conduct a Zoom call.

*Opinion: Very good option for larger families or groups although the 40 minute limit in the free version is less than other competitors.*

**Skype:** Skype's free version allows up to 100 Skype to Skype users on a video call for up to 4 hours. The free version also has a limit of 10 hours/day and 100 hours/month. Fees may apply for non-Skype users. Skype also supports international calling and texting. Calling other Skype users (including international calls) can be free if you make the calls via Wi-Fi. Calls to non-Skype users would require fees. Microsoft continues to support Skype for personal use, but the paid version of Skype for business use is being replaced by Microsoft Teams.

*Opinion: Skype provides a very competitive option with fewer limitations in the free version than competitive solutions.*

**Microsoft Teams:** Microsoft Teams also works across all platforms. The free version supports up to 100 people on a video call for up to 60 minutes (vs. Zoom's 40-minute limitation). However, due to the ongoing pandemic, Microsoft Teams currently allows an unlimited number of meetings and up to 24 hours for up to 300 participants. Teams is also integrated with Microsoft Outlook and Office 365 to make it easier to schedule or conduct video calls or conferences as needed.

*Opinion: Microsoft Teams is a very good solution for those who use Microsoft Office and Office 365. The free version currently offers a more generous time limit than Zoom.*

**Slack:** Slack is also a business-oriented communication and collaboration platform, and it relies on third-party apps to add more features and capabilities. However, it also provides a free version with limited features that might be useful for individuals. Slack's free version supports one-to-one video and voice calling, chat, file sharing, notification, and file storage. It also allows you to integrate a limited number of apps.

*Opinion: Slack's free version has very limited features which makes it less useful than other options.*

**Webex:** Webex is also aimed at the business user looking for collaboration solutions for their extended teams. However, Webex also offers a "basic plan" for free which allows up to 100 individuals to join a video call for up to 50 minutes. Webex works on all platforms and integrates with Google calendar, Microsoft Outlook, and Microsoft Office 365 to make it easier to conduct video calls or conferences. You can also call anyone with a Webex account through the internet (VoIP call).

*Opinion: Webex is also a very good, competitive solution since it integrates with Microsoft products. However, the 50-minute time limitation is less than what Microsoft Teams supports.*

**Google Meet:** Google Meet is seamlessly integrated with Gmail, Google Workspace, and Google Chat, and it works across all platforms. While the primary purpose is to schedule and conduct meetings, it can also support video calls and conferences. The free version supports up to 100 users for 60 minutes (the users would need to sign into a Google account).

*Opinion: Ideal solution for those who use Gmail and Google Workspace products. Easy to use since it's integrated with Google apps. However, given the frequent changes in Google's offerings, it may be a less attractive long-term solution than other cross-platform solutions described above.*

Although the apps I reviewed are most of the popular and frequently used ones for video calling and instant messaging, there are many more apps available in the marketplace. However, most of these apps serve either specific audiences, are relatively new, or have limitations in features and capabilities. Some of these apps include Discord (gamers), Signal, JusTalk, Kik, Bunch, Squad, Jami, Talky, and Marco Polo (essentially conversing by sharing and responding to video recordings).

As I mentioned in the introduction, there are so many choices, and such frequent changes that it can all be a bit messy and confusing topic. However, I hope this article helps you decide which app(s) may be best suited to meet your needs to stay connected to your family, friends, or colleagues.

### **Tech Coach Assistance**

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